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ABSTRACT

Electronic mail (e-mail) messages were examined in terms of the relationship of texts to features of the communicative event itself. A tentative look was taken at how one particular component of the communicative event could explain differences and similarities in different text types as well as within the same type. The assumption was that texts (written or spoken) should be compared with each other indirectly, with reference to the primary purpose of the communicative event, the transmission of content (transaction), and/or the expression of social relationships or personal attitudes (interaction). Examples of e-mail messages and letters to the editor of "Time" magazine are cited to illustrate variations in written texts. It is concluded that written texts, regardless of their level of formality or intimacy, can show the writer's focus on interaction, and that this potential focus on interaction in e-mail messages can be realized by similar linguistic means as in spoken texts or even by quite different means. (LB)

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TRANSACTION AND INTERACTION IN WRITING: THE CASE OF ELECTRONIC MAIL

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Introduction

Researchers used to compare written texts directly with spoken texts, or the other way round, for possible similarities or differences. Texts were analyzed as having features characteristic of "stereotypical" spoken/oral language or of written/literate language. This kind of an approach has resulted in various one-dimensional categorizations of texts.

We made an attempt to categorize electronic mail messages (e-mail messages), an interesting new text type, in this way. However, the placement of the e-mail messages along the one-dimensional continua of text features turned out to be problematic: some of the e-mail messages seemed to fall onto the "written" end of the continua, while others could be placed to the "spoken" end. We realized that in order to explain the linguistic variation within this text type we needed to look at the texts with reference to the communicative event. Our focus of interest thus shifted from the analysis of text features to an analysis which relates texts to features of the communicative event itself.

In this paper, we have a tentative look at how one particular component of the communicative event could explain differences and similarities in different text types as well as within one and the same text type. In doing this our assumption is that texts - whether written or spoken - should be compared with each other indirectly, with reference to the primary purpose of the communicative event, the transmission of content (transaction) and/or the expression of social relationships or personal attitudes (interaction).

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From direct to indirect comparisons of written and spoken texts

Spoken texts used to be compared with written texts for possible differences. Chafe (1982, 1986), for example, noted that spoken texts - everyday conversations - were syntactically less complex than written texts - scientific articles. More specifically, spoken texts did not have passive constructions, nominalizations, and complex clause structures etc., in the way, Chafe argued, written texts did.

Interestingly, Halliday (1985, 1987) claimed that also spoken texts were syntactically complex. In his view their grammatical intricacy (the complex patterns and strategies used to link clauses together) was of a higher degree than that of written texts. Written texts were, in turn, syntactically complex in another way: their lexical density was higher than that of spoken texts. For Halliday there were then two kinds of syntactic complexity, which he referred to as the choreographic complexity of spoken language and the crystalline complexity of written language.

Until Halliday, the implication had been that spoken texts were in these respects inferior to written texts.

Not long ago we ran into an article (Sherblom 1988) where the opposite was the case, that is, written texts were compared with spoken texts, more specifically e-mail messages with everyday conversations, for possible differences. This article, reporting ideas presented in earlier research on e-mail (eg. Uhlig 1977, Rice et al. 1984, Ruben 1988 quoted in Sherblom 1988), claimed among other things that e-mail messages lacked all the nuances of speech and most of the non-verbal cues, such as nods, gestures and facial expressions present in face-to-face communication. E-mail messages contained "reduced communication cues" in comparison to face-to-face communication. Consequently, e-mail appeared as "unsociable, insensitive, cold, and impersonal" (Sherblom 1988:41). Now the implication seems to be quite the reverse: written texts are seen as somehow inferior to spoken texts.

This made us realize the futility of comparing written texts directly with spoken ones. These comparisons often seemed to imply a normative yardstick: any deviation from the norms established for one text type was taken as evidence of

the inferiority or of the secondary nature of the other text type. Therefore we are suggesting that these comparisons should be made indirectly by establishing a *tertium comparationis*. The advantage of this position is that this way we can avoid the implicit prescriptiveness of earlier studies on written and spoken texts.

From one-dimensional to two-dimensional description(s) of writing and speaking

In previous studies texts were compared by placing them on a continuum or continua (such as those of fragmentation and integration; and of involvement and detachment). Written texts typically fell on one end of the continua and spoken texts on the other (see, for example, Chafe 1982, 1986; Chafe & Danielewicz 1987; Tannen 1982, 1984, 1986). These kinds of continua made it possible to distinguish written texts which were spoken-like and spoken texts which were written-like using as criteria features of stereotypical written and spoken texts. However, these do not allow the possibility of texts which have a high proportion of features typical of both written and spoken language. Consequently, instead of describing differences of written and spoken texts by placing them on continua, we are proposing that the two extremes of each continuum should be considered independent dimensions. Together they form a two-dimensional space within which texts can be mapped simultaneously along both dimensions. In theory, this would make it possible to have texts which are at the same time written-like *and* spoken-like, rather than more or less written-like *or* spoken-like.

One continuum (or dimension) along which comparisons of texts were made was that of detachment and involvement. For Chafe (1986) and Chafe & Danielewicz (1987) these terms referred to the relation of the writer or speaker to himself or herself, to topic or text, to concrete reality, and to his or her audience. The realizations of this relation were primarily lexical and syntactic (Chafe 1986). For example, the use of first person personal pronouns seemed to indicate ego-involvement.

The notions of detachment and involvement were adopted by Tannen (1984, 1986, 1989). She, however, suggested that the realizations of these relations were strategic rather than syntactic. As this kind of strategic realizations of

involvement she mentioned sound strategies, such as rhythm and repetition; and meaning strategies, such as indirectness, ellipses, dialogue, and imagery, etc.

Tannen (1984, 1986, 1989) reformulated Chafe's ideas in another way, too. She replaced the terms detachment and involvement by those of relative focus on information and on involvement. By this she hoped to "eschew a dichotomous view of speaking and writing in favor of the view that both can display a variety of features depending on the communicative situation, goal, genre, and so on ... " (Tannen 1984:21).

Tannen, however, left the term involvement very vague (see for example Tannen 1984, 1986, 1989). It seems to us that in addition to using the term in the senses suggested by Chafe, she also made it cover other kinds of phenomena, such as the way in which a literary text forces its readers to become involved with the fictional world it depicts (Tannen 1986). This perhaps unavoidable elusiveness and fuzziness of the notion of involvement led us to adopt the more explicitly formulated terms transaction and interaction instead. These notions have been suggested by for example Brown and Yule (1983). By transaction they refer to the expression of content; and by interaction to the establishment and maintenance of a social relation, and to the expression of personal attitudes.

Transaction and interaction, similarly to Tannen's focus on information and on involvement, were seen as dependent on the overall goals of written or spoken texts. To our minds texts themselves do not have goals: it is the writers or speakers who have goals and who seek to fulfil these goals linguistically in texts. This also means that instead of considering texts to be independent entities, we regard them as components of communicative situations of writing or speaking. This idea is by no means a new one; it has been suggested by Chafe & Danielewicz (1987), Tannen (1984), Biber (1988), and Östman (1987) among others.

We thus see transaction and interaction as goals of writers and speakers. They could be taken as one distinct two-dimensional space within which any text can be mapped.

Hypotheses and some observations on the data

Our hypothesis is that there can be written texts which show that the writer's primary concern is transaction, and that there can also be written texts which show that his or her main concern is interaction, or *both* equally. This of course can apply not only to written texts but also to spoken ones.

Our second hypothesis is that there can be variation in this respect even within one text type. To test these hypotheses we decided to compare two types of written texts, namely, e-mail messages (placed on a bulletin board called *Talk Politics Middle East*) with letters-to-the-Editor to *Time*, a journal published weekly. In choosing these two kinds of texts to be compared we made an attempt to control for the writer-reader relationship (they do not know each other) and for topic (the 1990-91 Middle East crisis).

Let us consider some examples. The first one is an e-mail message:

Example 1

In article <1990Sep24.204528.16138 @agate.berkeley.edu>, steve@violet.berkeley.edu (Steve Goldfield) writes: There have also been demonstrations in Egypt opposing Egypt's participation in the US intervention (it takes a lot of courage to demonstrate in a place like Egypt). And Egyptians were prevented from participating in a peace conference. Takes a lot of courage to do the same in Kuwait. Oops, they don't count, right?
The "strong and broad support" appears to be wishful thinking on the part of the American media.
The "strong and broad support" against Kuwaitis seems to be all there. And the Saudis seem pretty pleased, in general. Too bad this doesn't count for anything, huh, Steve. I mean, they're only the people we're down here helping. Who cares what THEY think?
-MSM

- - - - - - - -
Mark S. Miller UUUCP:msmiller @Sun.COM

"In a nation ruled by swine, all pigs are upward mobile"
- Hunter S. Thompson
Disclaimer> I work for me, so do my words.

The writer of this e-mail message clearly has interaction as one of his goals. To this end, he uses a number of linguistic devices, such as *oops* (interjections), *I*

mean (pragmatic particles), *right?* and *huh, Steve* (kind of tag questions and direct forms of address), *Who cares what THEY think?* (questions and capitalizations), etc.

Our second example is a letter-to-the Editor to *Time International* (3 September 1990, p. 5):

Example 2

George Bush, Congress and the Pentagon brass should all get down on their knees and thank God for the Iraqi invasion. Nothing distracts attention from domestic corruption and incompetence like war. A conflict in greater Arabia will benefit the yoyos who have brought America to the brink of economic ruin and social chaos.

Cynthia E. Leichter
Seattle

Unlike the writer of the e-mail message, this writer seems only to be concerned with the expression of her opinions. Hence the lack of such interactive devices as we found in our first example.

The third example is again an e-mail message, but in some respects a very different one from Example 1:

Example 3

Well, Bob, you have to understand that your postings, however fact/filled they may be, always seem to leave the impression that you say Israel can do no wrong. Goldfield and Kolling and the others seem to think that Israel can do right, and is accountable for everything. Therefore, the polarization that we see these entirely yours and Goldfield/Kolling/ARFs creation. Slander and lies is also subjective. Facts can be used two ways, and who is really sure which way is the correct one? Israel is not to blame for all of the problems in the territories, on the other hand it is not exactly unaccountable. The best solution for peace is to cut off everyone's fingers so they can't point anymore. Or isolate the hard-liners and the PLO on an island and give them sticks to beat each other to death with. The PLO is a very fragile organization over which Arafat has only nominal control. There are people in the hierarchy whom he does not dare cross. I condemn the PLO, not so much for its actions against Israel, but for its actions against other Arabs. If the PLO has had to kill over 200 Palestinians suspected of collaborating with Israel, it clearly has some problems. Nothing should justify that.

Well, so much for my tirade. Let the flames begin.

Sanjiv Sarwate

> "Do you hear the people sing/Singing the song of angry men?/It is the music of a people/ Who will not be slaves again!" - From Les Miserables

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In spite of the use of some interactive devices, such as *well, Bob* (pragmatic particles and direct forms of address), this writer seems primarily to be concerned with the transmission of information and expression of opinions. In this respect, his message resembles our second example: there, too, the writer's goal seemed primarily to be the expression of her opinions, rather than the establishment and maintenance of a social relationship, or the expression of personal feelings or attitudes.

These examples seem to give support to our two hypotheses. Firstly, there are written texts which show that the writer's main objective can be the transmission of facts and written texts which show that the writer's aim is the establishment or maintenance of a social relation with the reader(s) and the expression of personal attitudes. Secondly, there are written texts which indicate that the writer has both transactional and interactional goals. Our second hypothesis - that there can be variation in this respect even within one and the same text type - seems also to be correct.

These are of course preliminary observations, and they will be followed by a systematic analysis of the data. One problem we see in doing this is the identification and classification of the linguistic realizations of the writer's or speaker's goals.

Conclusion

To sum up, what we are proposing is a framework within which we could compare texts with each other indirectly, irrespective of mode, and explain similarities and/or differences found in them with reference to the overall goals of the writers or speakers. The advantage of this kind of an approach is that we

are now able to analyze e-mail messages without having to claim that they are spoken-like, or that they show features typical of spoken texts. What we claim is that also written texts, regardless of their level of formality or intimacy, can show the writer's focus on interaction. It seems that this potential focus on interaction in e-mail messages can be realized by similar linguistic means as in spoken texts, or, what is most interesting, by quite different means.

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